STRAWBERRIES.

'Twas after church, and winsome June
Invited us from beaten way
To stroll where mated birds still tune
Their tribute songs. Ah! sweet the day!
And glad the gleam of hope that lay
Across that meeting opportune.

We passed the lichened bars, and through
The shady lane went side by side,
Half hidden in the maze of new
Rich grass we saw the ruddy tide
Of peerless fruit, whose blushes dyed
The tremulous gems of early dew.

We bent to pluck them. "Sue," said he—
His hands o'erbrimming with their prey—
"Here's witness of my love for thee;
It is my heart's best blood that dyes
These tits ambrosial." Then his eyes
Beamed with expectant ecstasy.

I took not of the fruity lush,
But reveried the while he ate,
And yet, in solitude's deep hush,
When I had parted from my mate,
I could not to my conscience state
What gave my lips their berry blush.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

BY HUGH CONWAY,

Author of "Called Back" and "Dark Days."

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. MILLER TAKES A HOLIDAY.

Mrs. Miller, the respectable, middle-aged widow who had, in spite of her lack of properly authenticated services testimonials, been installed in the place vacated by the nurse girl whose amorous tendencies sent such a thrill through Hazlewood House, continued to give the greatest satisfaction. She was a living proof that a broom which swept clean when new, may continue to do so after the newness has departed. Moreover, Mrs. Miller was a broom which raised very little dust as it swept.

She was a pale-faced woman with strongly marked features. The nose was aquiline, the cheeks thin, almost hollow; the mouth and chin told of a certain force of character, the eyes were dark, and at times shone with peculiar brightness. In spite of the calm, methodical way in which she went about the place in discharge of her duties, one skilled in the study of the face would have said that this woman possessed a highly nervous temperament—that her quiet was but the result of years of self-control, that had she lacked that strong mouth and chin, Mrs. Miller's true nature would have shown itself at every hour of the day.

She was thin, and in the dark gowns which she invariably wore, looked almost ascetic. To men she presented few attractions. The under gardener who had been reprimanded, but not dismissed, found the change of nurses a sorry one for him. Had he wished to do so, I doubt if the most forward man servant would have dared to put his arm round Mrs. Miller's sombre waist.

But her masters liked her, Miss Clauson liked her, the boy liked her, and, above all, Whittaker liked her. This last was an important matter, as in the servant's hall Whittaker, by virtue of long service and irreproachable character, reigned supreme.

The new nurse was in many ways a servant after his own heart. She treated him with the respect which was his due, and neither by word nor action ridiculed his masters—the crime common to nearly all the retainers of Hazlewood House. The only fault which Whittaker could find with Mrs. Miller was on account of her religious sentiments.

For Whittaker was an intelligent man, who in his hours of leisure improved his mind. For theology he read good old-fashioned, one-sided works which proved beyond doubt that through the porch of the parish church lay the only road to Heaven. Every one knows that it is delightful to give a newcomer the benefit of one's own religious views—to point out where one is right and the other wrong. It was but natural that in a kindly, paternal way Whittaker should take an early opportunity of ascertaining Mrs. Miller's orthodoxy.

He did this in the butler's pantry, whither she had one day come on some errand. It was on a Monday, and Whittaker began by commenting on Mr. Mordle's sermon of the preceding night. He little guessed what a storm his words would raise—how by sheer accident he had stumbled on a way of turning this calm-looking woman into a wild enthusiast. But he had in fact struck the fire from the flint.

She forgot all about her errand, and entered into religious discussion in a way that took the male disputant's breath from him. She talked about election and predestination—the utter inefficacy of works or faith to save—she pounded him with terrible texts which cut off the hope of mercy from all save the elect, until poor old Whittaker fairly gasped. His cut-and-dried studies furnished no weapons with which to meet her vehement attack. All he could do was to shake his head pityingly and sigh for the state of her mind. In this he was little different from many reputed teachers of men.

She pounded him with terrible texts until Whittaker fairly gasped.

Suddenly, as if remembering where she was, Mrs. Miller grew calm, but evidently by a great effort of self-control. She even apologized for her excitement, which she hoped Mr. Whittaker would forget. Then she left him.

In his responsible position his first thought was that his masters ought to be informed of the heterodox views held by the nurse. But this seemed scarcely fair to the woman, who, in spite of all, went to church as regularly as the other servants. So he did not mention the matter to the Talberts, but, overtaking Mr. Mordle as the latter was one day walking into the town, he, with all respect, told him what strange ideas Mrs. Miller held on religious subjects. This may seem presumption on Whittaker's part, but the truth is, that the dream of his life was, that had not fate made him a butler he might have been a clergyman. And a very imposing one he would doubtless have made.

"Ah!" said Mordle. "Calvinism—dreary religion—most dismal and dreary of all."

The curate was rather short with Whittaker. He thought the old servant rather a nuisance and somewhat of a prig.

"Will you see her and talk to her, sir?" asked Whittaker, respectfully.

"No—Calvinists are incurable. But to please you, Whittaker, I'll preach at her some Sunday."

It may be presumed that Mrs. Miller did not inflict her Calvinism upon Beatrice, as the latter seemed to find the new nurse perfectly suited to her duties. It was clear that Mrs. Miller had become strangely attached to her young mistress. Nothing seemed to give her such pleasure as performing any small personal service which Miss Clauson required. When Beatrice passed her, the woman's dark eyes followed her with an expression of almost dog-like affection. On her part Beatrice treated the nurse with a consideration not always shown by the most amiable toward their servants. It was vulgarly said among the household that Mrs. Miller, quiet as she was, had managed to get the length of Miss Clauson's foot.

Whether Mrs. Miller was unduly favored or not, things at Hazlewood House ran on smoothly. Perhaps it was the perfect order in which the gear worked that induced the nurse to take a day's holiday.

It was the day after Mr. Mordle had made and lost his venture. Horace and Herbert, pottering about the gardens, saw the bright-haired boy going out in charge of the parlor maid. This was an infraction of rules which could not be overlooked. They demanded the cause, and were told that Mrs. Miller had gone for a day's holiday.

Of course the brothers said no more; but, upon seeing Beatrice, they mentioned the matter to her. "Yes," she said, "I told her she might go for the day."

The Talberts were too polite to blame Beatrice in words, but a slight elevation of four eyebrows showed their owners' discontent. Beatrice, in giving a servant a holiday, had taken a liberty.

"Where has she gone?" asked Herbert, who liked to know that his servants were spending their time properly.

"To London, I suppose," said Beatrice, carelessly.

Now the way in which Mrs. Miller spent her holiday was as follows:

She rose at an early hour and walked from Hazlewood House to the cross roads. Here she waited until the lumbering, old-fashioned 'bus came in sight. She took a seat in it, and was in due time deposited at the Blacktown station. At Blacktown she took the train to Weymouth, which fashionable watering place she reached about 11 o'clock.

It was, however, clear that she had not come here to enjoy a day at the seaside. Instead of going at once to the gay esplanade, she sought the shades of the general waiting room—here she remained an hour.

She then embarked in another train; one that ran on a single line of railway—for nearly the whole of its way with the sea on one side and a mighty hill of smooth, rounded pebbles, known as the Chesil Beach, on the other, whilst in front of it loomed tall serrated, precipitous cliffs, at the foot of which was its destination.

Mrs. Miller paid no attention to the natural scenery of the place. She stepped from the train and walked out of the little station in a methodical, business-like way. It was evident that the woman had not come so far on a mere pleasure jaunt.

It was a burning day. The sun shot down its rays fiercely on the treeless, shadeless barren island, or so-called island. Mrs. Miller's black garments seemed scarcely suitable to such weather—her frame certainly not strong enough to toil up those cliffs of oolitic limestone which frowned down upon her. No wonder she turned to the cabstand. The two or three cabs which it boasted were rickety old machines, but the horses which were between the shafts were strong ones. Horses need be strong to earn a living in this land.

She drove a bargain after the manner of her kind, then took her seat in one of the dusty vehicles. She was driven through the little gray town, which lies at the foot of and stretches a long way up the hill. The horse toiled up the steep street, on and on until the occupant of the cab looked down on the tops of the houses which she had just passed. Then a turn, and a bit of level ground, another turn and a steep hill; so on and on in a zigzag course until the table land which lies at the top of Portland island was somehow reached, an event which must have been grateful alike to the horse and the occupant of the cab, supposing the latter only possessed of nerves of ordinary strength and therefore apt to rebel against being drawn up hills as steep as the side of a house.

Some time before the cab reached the top of the cliffs it had at intervals passed gangs of men working by the roadside. At a distance these men looked little different from ordinary navvies, but a closer inspection showed that the garments of most of them consisted of a dark yellow jersey covered by a sleeveless jacket of light fustian or some such material. This jacket, moreover, was stamped in various places with the government broad arrow. Every man wore gaiters and a curiously-shaped cap, under which no hair was visible. Occasionally one might be seen who moved with a certain stiffness in his gait, as if something which he would willingly have dispensed with restrained the natural elasticity of his lower limbs. Here and there the monotony of the attire was broken by the appearance of some who were dressed in blue instead of yellow; but taken altogether the dress, if comfortable and enduring, was scarcely one which a man being a free agent would choose for himself.

The gangs which Mrs. Miller passed on the roadside were for the most part engaged in handing lumps of turf from man to man. They performed these duties in a listless, perfunctory manner, although, standing on the hillside above every band of workers, were two men in long dark coats with the shining buttons of authority, and each of these men held a rifle with fixed bayonet.

Farther away in the quarries could be seen many other such gangs, digging, delving, hauling, wheeling barrows, and performing other operations needful for extracting the famed Portland stone from the ground.

After passing various sentries, and driving for some distance along the level ground, Mrs. Miller's cab reached a beautiful, tall, buttressed wall; skirting this it turned at right angles, and very soon drew up before an imposing entrance built of gray stone, and bearing over the archway the royal arms of England. This was the entrance to her majesty's prison of Portland.

In front of it, across the road, stretched the governor's garden, still brilliant with flowers and looking like a glorious oasis in the midst of a barren land. A man who in the discharge of his duties has to live on the top of Portland island wants a garden or something of that sort. Without it the monotony of the place would drive him mad.

But Mrs. Miller did not even look at the gay beds. She dismounted, and after telling the cabman to wait for her, walked boldly through the prison gate.

She was immediately accosted by a portly, good-tempered-looking janitor, whose gold-laced cap spoke of superior standing. He ushered her into a little waiting-room just inside the gate, and asked her to state her business. Mrs. Miller's business was to see one of the convicts, by name Maurice Harvey.

Now, convicts are only allowed to see their friends once in six months; so the janitor shook his head dubiously. Still, as Mrs. Miller was a most respectable-looking woman, he said he would mention the matter to the governor. He begged the lady to take a chair and then left her.

She sat for some time in the bare little waiting room, the walls of which were decorated with notices requesting visitors to the prison not to offer the warders any money, but to deposit such donations as they wished to make in boxes that were hung against the wall for the benefit of discharged prisoners and the officers' schools respectively. After a while the good-natured janitor returned. He told Mrs. Miller that the convict had not been a friend for many months, so upon his return from work he would be asked if he would like to see her. She must give her name.

She wrote it down, then waited patiently. By and by there was a measured tramp of many heavy feet, and she knew the convicts were returning to dinner. After the tramp had died away a warder made his appearance and told her to follow him.

It was but a step. He opened a door in the rear of the waiting room, and Mrs. Miller found herself in a place which could suggest nothing else than a den at a zoological garden; one side of the room being formed of iron bars about six inches apart, and opposite was a similar den with its front turned towards it and entered by another door, and between the two was a space, a narrow den, entered by another door and containing a stool.

Presently the door of the middle den opened and a warder entered and seated himself upon the stool; then the furthest door opened, and one of the like-habited convicts walked up to the bars and gave his visitor a nod of careless recognition.

As a rule, when a female friend is permitted to see a convict there is weeping and wailing. Hands are stretched out through the bars across the open space, and if the two persons are of ordinary stature, finger tips may just meet. This is better than nothing. Time was when no open space divided the friends; they could kiss and almost embrace through one set of bars. But it was found that the visitor's kiss often transferred a half-sovereign from her mouth to the convict's. A kindly action, no doubt, but one which when discovered led the man into trouble, knocked off good-conduct marks, and lengthened his time of imprisonment. So now there is a space of something like five feet between the visitor and the visited.

With these two there was no weeping, no stretching out of hands. In fact, as Mrs. Miller looked at the caged creature in front of her an expression very nearly akin to hatred settled on her strongly-marked features. Yet, in spite of his close-clipped crown, shaven cheeks and ugly attire the convict was by no means ill-looking. His features were straight, and might even have been called refined. He was above the middle height, broad shouldered and healthy looking. His teeth were good, and his hands, although rough and hardened with toil, were not the hands of one who has labored from his childhood. His eyes had a cruel, crafty look in them; but this look might have been acquired since his incarceration. Indeed, Mrs. Miller had noticed the same expression in the eyes of every convict whom she had met on the road to the prison.

Mrs. Miller looked through her bars at the convict; the convict looked through his bars

Mrs. Miller looked through her bars at the convict.

at Mrs. Miller; the warder between them sat on his stool sublimely indifferent and for a while there was silence. The convict was the first to break it.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said.

"Yes, it's me," said Mrs. Miller.

"Well, what do you want? To see how I am getting on?"

He spoke quite jauntily. His visitor gazed at him scornfully.

"Oh, I'm in splendid health," he continued. "Physically, I'm twice the man I was when I came here. Regular hours, regular meals, regular work. Constitution quite set up. No chance of my dying before my term's up."

"No, I'm afraid there isn't," said Mrs. Miller with such bitterness that the impassive warder glanced at her, and wondered what manner of prisoner's friend this was.

The prisoner's face changed. He scowled at her as darkly as she had scowled at him.

"When will your time be up?" she asked sharply. "Can you tell me?" she added, turning to the warder.

"Can't say exactly," answered the warder. "He's in blue, so he's in his last year."

Mrs. Miller shuddered. Her hands clenched themselves involuntarily.

"I want to know," she said, addressing the convict, "what arrangements you will be willing to make when you come out. That is the object of my visit."

The man looked at her mockingly. "I have thought of nothing as yet," he said, "except the joy I shall feel at once more returning to the arms of my devoted wife."

The woman's dark eyes blazed. She leaned her face against the bars and glared at the shaven face before her. "How much money do you want?" she whispered.

The convict shrugged his uninteresting-looking shoulders. "Money is an after consideration. I am pining for connubial felicity."

She turned and paced the narrow space. The warder grew quite interested in the interview. As a rule his duties were very monotonous. He recognized the fact that the present conversation was out of the ordinary run. The woman seemed to have forgotten his presence. She stamped her foot and turned fiercely to the convict.

"Look here," she said, "will you go to America, Australia, anywhere? Money will be found."

"Certainly not," said the polite convict. "Besides, sir," he added, turning to the warder with an assumed air of deference, "I believe it is a *sine qua non*, I mean it is indispensable, that for some time I must report myself to the police once a month?"

The warder nodded.

"God help us!" murmured the woman. Then turning to the convict, she said:

"You'll let me know when you are released?"

"Oh, yes. I'll let you know fast enough. You'll be one of the first I shall come and see. Now, if you've nothing more to say, I'll ask to be taken back to my dinner. Good and plentiful as the fare is, I like it warm better than cold."

The stolid warder could not help smiling. The time usually allotted for an interview with a prisoner had by no means expired. It was a new experience to find a convict of his own free will curtailing his privilege. He turned inquiringly to Mrs. Miller.

"Got anything more to say to him?" he asked.

"No," she answered sullenly. The convict made her a polite bow as she turned and walked to the door of her own den. She stood outside on the gravel for a moment, and gazed moodily after No. 1,080 as he was conducted by his guardian across the open space and vanished from sight round the chapel on the way to his own cell. Then she entered the waiting room, where she found the civil official who had at first accosted her.

From him she ascertained the proper office at which the inquiry she wanted answered should be made; and upon applying there learnt that No. 1,080, supposing he continued to conduct himself as he had hitherto done, that is, earning the maximum of eight good marks a day, would obtain his ticket-of-leave in about six months' time.

"Then what becomes of him?" she asked. "Do you just put him outside the gate, and tell him to be off?"

The officer smiled. "Oh dear, no. He is asked if he has any friends to go to, or where he wants to go to. His fare is paid to that place. He is given a suit of clothes and a little money. After that he must do the best he can."

Mrs. Miller looked thoughtful. "Is there anyone I could write to and ask to be told the day he will come out?" she asked.

"Certainly. If you are a relation or friend, and willing to look after him, and wrote to the governor to that effect, no doubt you would hear from him."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Miller. Then she gathered up her black skirts and left the prison. She found her cab and was driven back to the railway station. It was some time before the train left for Weymouth; so she climbed to the top of the Chesil Beach and sat down gazing out over the sea. Her lips moved, although the rest of her body was motionless. She was praying, and the petition she offered up was that Heaven in its mercy would remove from earth a certain convict before the day came upon which he would be entitled to demand his freedom. A curious prayer for a religious woman to make, but after all not stranger than the prayers offered up by antagonistic armies.

The train started at last and took her to Weymouth. Here she obtained refreshment, of which, indeed, she stood much in need. Somehow she made a mistake in the time, and missed the afternoon train. The consequence was that it was past eleven o'clock when she rang the bell of that methodically-conducted establishment, Hazlewood House. And the rule of Hazlewood House was that no servant should on any pretence be out of doors after half-past nine; or, unless the presence of company demanded it, out of bed after half-past ten.

Her masters were in waiting, and at once took her to task. She explained that she had missed the train.

"What train?" asked Horace.

"The train from Weymouth, sir."

"But Miss Clauson told us you were gone to London."

"Miss Clauson made a mistake, sir."

Horace felt nettled at the idea of any one who held even a vicarious authority from himself making a mistake. So he said, with some asperity, "This must not occur again, Mrs. Miller."

"And," added Herbert, "the next time you want a holiday kindly mention the fact to us as well as to Miss Clauson. We have a rule in these matters."

Mrs. Miller curtsied, and left the room.

"She is a curious looking woman," said Horace. "I wonder if we were right in taking her without a character?"

CHAPTER IX.

JUMPING AT CONCLUSIONS.

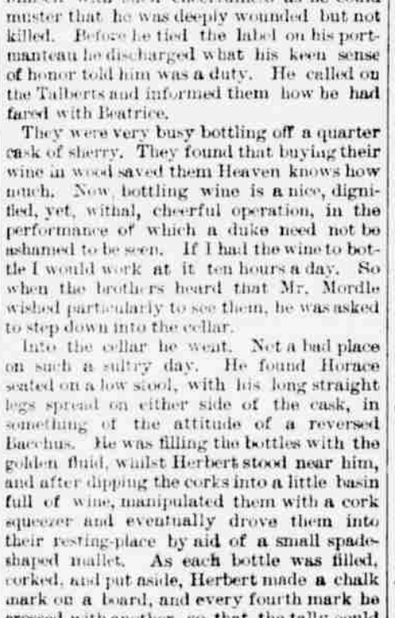
Mr. Mordle went away the next week. He carried his sorrow with him, manfully resolved to do all he could to leave it on the summit of Mont Blanc or the Matterhorn, to sink it in the Lake of Maggiore or Como, or to cast it upon the flowing Rhine. He told himself with such cheerfulness as he could muster that he was deeply wounded but not killed. Before he tied the label on his portmanteau he discharged what his keen sense of honor told him was a duty. He called on the Talberts and informed them how he had fared with Beatrice.

They were very busy bottling off a quarter cask of sherry. They found that buying their wine in wood saved them Heaven knows how much. Now, bottling wine is a nice, dignified, yet, withal, cheerful operation, in the performance of which a duke need not be ashamed to be seen. If I had the wine to bottle I would work at it ten hours a day. So when the brothers heard that Mr. Mordle wished particularly to see them, he was asked to step down into the cellar.

Into the cellar he went. Not a bad place on such a sultry day. He found Horace seated on a low stool, with his long straight legs spread on either side of the cask, in something of the attitude of a reversed Bacchus. He was filling the bottles with the golden fluid, whilst Herbert stood near him, and after dipping the corks into a little basin full of wine, manipulated them with a cork squeezer and eventually drove them into their resting-place by aid of a small spade-shaped mallet. As each bottle was filled, corked, and put aside, Herbert made a chalk mark on a board, and every fourth mark he crossed with another, so that the tally could be easily counted. The whole performance was beautifully methodical and business-like, reflecting great credit on the actors.

With their native politeness, the moment Mr. Mordle came in sight they ceased their occupation. Horace turned the tap and rose from the half filled bottle; Herbert left the cork half driven in. They greeted their visitor and apologized for bringing him down to the lower regions. Although they wore large coarse white aprons, fashioned somewhat like a girl's pinafore, they looked two well-bred gentlemen.

"I say," said the curate nervously, "you know I'm off the day after to-morrow."



"I say," said the curate, nervously.

"Yes. We wish you a pleasant trip."

"Thanks. Sure to enjoy myself. I want to tell you something before I go." They begged him to speak. They thought it was some petty parish matter on his mind.

"Do you mind taking off your aprons for a minute? Somehow my news doesn't seem to fit in with them."

Mr. Mordle was a privileged person. He could say and do what few others could. Moreover, his manner showed them he had something of importance to communicate.

Without a word they untied their pinafores, folded them up and laid them across the sherry cask.

"Shall we go up stairs?" asked Horace.

"Oh dear, no. This will do capitally. What I want to tell you is this: Last week I asked Miss Clauson to marry me. She refused. Thought you ought to know."

Horace looked at Herbert; Herbert looked at Horace. They stroked their beards meditatively, but for some time neither spoke.

"Well," said Mr. Mordle, "that's all."

"I think, Mordle," said Horace sadly, "you should have consulted us first."

"Quite so," said Herbert.

"Don't see it at all. Miss Clauson is of age. But it doesn't matter—I tell you now."

The brothers shook their heads gravely.

"I tell you," said Sylvanus, "because I'm going away to cure myself. When I come back I should like to be able to visit you as before. You needn't be afraid."

"Miss Clauson must decide," said Horace.

"Exactly so," said Herbert.

So the matter was left, and Mr. Mordle went away on his hard-earned holiday with a clear conscience, if a heavy heart.

The brothers returned to their fascinating occupation and worked away for some time in silence. Three dozen of sherry must have been bottled before Horace spoke:

"It is time Beatrice was married."

"Yes," said his brother; "but she isn't a marrying girl. She takes after us, I think."

There was always a comfort in this reflection; especially now, when the fame of Miss Clauson's good looks had spread through half Westshire.

It was indeed time that a suitable suitor made his appearance. The chances were that in a year or two the girl might fall into her uncles' old-maidish ways. For the Talberts were now getting into a domestic groove down which it seemed likely they would slide until the end of their lives. They had of course seen the great world and the vanities thereof, and now they found that there was nothing like home, sweet home—especially when the disposition of the home-lover is such that he takes an immense interest in every detail which makes up that sweetness. With the exception of the perennial visit to town, they had not left Hazlewood House for any length of time since they settled down to rule its fortunes. They went to London this year for the last week in May and the whole of June. But Miss Clauson did not accompany them. She said outright that she hated London, and loved Oakbury and its belongings. So at Oakbury she stayed. A very curious choice on the part of a young lady who might, had she wished to do so, have spent the London season mingling in the pursuits and gayeties of what is called the upper circle.

However, her decision was a certain relief to her uncles. Had she selected to accompany them to town, they would hardly have known what to do with her. A handsome niece staying with them at their hotel would be—well, if not a nuisance, a responsibility. Approving as they did in the main of her treatment of Lady Clauson, they could not counsel her to go to her father's house. There were, of course, many families they knew who would have been glad to have taken charge of a niece of theirs, but Beatrice's staying at another establishment whilst Sir Maingay was in town would clearly show the world that there was a family feud. Nothing in the Talberts' eyes was worse than a proclaimed family feud. Hence it was that even now they spoke of Beatrice as only being on a visit to them. This delicacy on their part was a costly matter, for had they brought themselves to consider the girl as part of the house, they might with perfect justice and propriety have associated her with themselves in the June audit, so giving Horace another opportunity of showing his skill in accounts and estimates.

So when Miss Clauson refused to go to London she extricated her uncles from a dilemma. She stayed at Hazelwood House, and for five weeks ruled Whittaker and the other servants as well as she could.

The Talberts had now settled down for the remainder of the year. Autumn or winter would make little difference to them. They were not, as may easily be imagined, enthusiastic sportsmen. Sometimes they accepted an invitation for a day or two's shooting; but that acceptance depended more on the quality of the host than on that of the sport. Although when they did shoot, they shot fairly well—as they did most other things—it may be taken for granted that their knowledge of the proper treatment of game was more valuable when the game was lying in the larder than when it was flying or running about. They could advise you how to baste a hare much better than how to shoot him. So it was that after their visit to London they looked upon themselves as pretty well fixed at Hazelwood House until the next spring.

Beatrice was now just past 22. It really was high time that a suitor came, and the "Tabbies," who could easily have adapted their feminine gifts to match making, began to think over the eligible young men in the county.

Then fate produced someone, whom, until now, she had kept in the background. But whether eligible or not is a matter we must discover by and by.

Beatrice entering the library one morning early in August found her uncles in high conclave. She saw at once that something had happened, and for the moment feared to hear that the red currant jelly recently made from their own receipt, and almost under their own supervision, had turned mouldy. It was not that Miss Clauson was particularly fond of red currant jelly, her fears were simply on account of the distress such a catastrophe would cause her uncles' kindly natures. However, the matter was not so serious as she imagined.

Uncle Horace handed her an open letter. "Read that, my dear, and tell us how we shall answer it." She read the following:

"Dear Mr. Talbert: You and your brother have several times asked me to pay you a visit. May I come for a week or two this vacation? I am rather knocked up by hard work, and my doctor tells me I had better spend some time in a quiet place in the country. So I remembered your kind invitation, and if quite convenient to you would come straight from Oxford to your house. Of course, although rather overworked, I am not an invalid, or I should not think of trespassing on you. Yours sincerely, Frank Carruthers."

"Who is Frank Carruthers?" asked Beatrice. "Some relation to us, is he not?"

"His mother was my father's half-sister."

"What relation does that make him to me?"

Herbert stroked his beard and grappled with the problem. "He must be your half first cousin once removed," he said at last.

"Exactly so," said Horace.

This point being settled, Miss Clauson requested further information about Mr. Carruthers. Thereupon Horace went into family history, which it will perhaps be better for us to look up on our own account. On such occasions Horace was apt to become rather prosy.

Old Talbert's half-sister, who was some years younger than himself, married, just before the successful coup came off, a man named Carruthers. It was no great match, and if Mr. Carruthers found domestic bliss it was well that he made his matrimonial arrangements before the "boom" in oil, tobacco, corn or whatever it was, sent Mr. Talbert to Hazlewood House and county society. Had he deferred it till then the chances are that Mr. Talbert would have insisted on his sister doing better; for Carruthers had only a moderate fixed income as manager of some works in the north.

Somehow after her marriage his half-sister slipped away from Mr. Talbert's life. As whole sisters and brothers so often do the same this fact is not astonishing. Mrs. Carruthers had several children—but one after another they died off. She wrote to her half-brother announcing the birth or the death of each. He answered her letters in a congratulatory or consolatory way as the occasion required. This was about all the correspondence which passed between them. When Horace and Herbert were lanky boys in Eton jackets and round collars Frank Carruthers was born, and actually lived long enough to give promise of growing up. Indeed, his father before he died saw his only surviving child a strapping young fellow of seventeen.

Mr. Carruthers left his widow an annuity for life and a few hundreds in ready money. She lived well within her income and expended her capital in finishing her son's education. She may have had some of old Talbert's views of things in general, although lacking his means of carrying them out. Anyway she sent her boy to Oxford. There, for three or four terms, he behaved disgracefully.

He got into scrapes, difficulties and debt. So far, indeed, into the last that his mother for the first and only time in her life applied to Mr. Talbert for assistance. This was given readily, and the young man was once more set off straight.

Then suddenly Mrs. Carruthers died. Out of her annuity she had saved enough each year to pay a premium of assurance, and Frank, when just twenty-one, found that her foresight and love put him in possession of some seventeen hundred pounds.

Whatever his faults might have been he was passionately attached to his mother. Her death seemed to make a changed man of him. He immediately paid back Mr. Talbert's loan—better still, he went to work like a horse—an intellectual horse, of course. The consequence was that he became one of the most shining lights of his year, and was in due time rewarded by a fellowship.

This was lucky; for after having repaid Mr. Talbert he had only enough money left to carry him to the end of his Oxford course.

Eventually he settled down to try and make his living, or augment the emoluments of his fellowship, as an Oxford "coach." At that particular time the supply of coaches was beyond the demand, so for some years, in spite of his brilliant reputation, passengers—or pupils—were few. But he stuck to the business, and latterly had been given as much, even more, than he could manage. Hence the overwork.

All this Uncle Horace told Beatrice in his own fashion—all except the wild-oat episode. That was past and gone; Frank was now a successful man, so his youthful sins might be forgotten.

Beatrice until now knew nothing about her fractional cousin. An intermittent and languishing correspondence had existed between her mother and Mrs. Carruthers, but upon the death of his first wife Sir Maingay had not the least interest in keeping up any form of relationship with Mrs. Carruthers. It is doubtful whether he even knew of her existence. The Talberts, who were far too proud to disown any of her kin, had met the young man several times and had liked what they had seen of him. They had asked him to Oakbury, and after excusing himself once or twice he was now coming there.

"Is he a clergyman?" asked Beatrice. "He must be, I suppose."

"No," said Herbert. "He never took orders. The fellowship he holds did not make that indispensable."

"They ought all to be like that," said Beatrice. "Men oughtn't to be forced or bribed to enter the church. Besides," continued she, "they ought not to make a man give up his fellowship when he marries. Just as he wants more money they take it from him. He must either give up his wife or his income."

Miss Clauson was growing quite a philosopher on the subject of marriage. She spoke about it as if it were an impossibility that she herself would ever be interested in the matter.

"My dear," said uncle Horace, gallantly, "I don't think a man would consider two hundred a year a great sacrifice if you were in the question."

She smiled faintly at the compliment. "Still the system must be bad," she said. "It might lead to all sorts of unhappiness. A man might keep his marriage a dead secret—might not marry at all. All sorts of misery might result."

"You may be sure," said Herbert, "what is is best."

"Exactly so," said Horace.

"I am sure it is bad," she said, decisively.

Miss Clauson must have been in advance of her day, the authorities now having in a great measure adopted her views and changed the system.

"Shall we write and tell him to come?" asked Horace. "It won't be any annoyance to you?"

"Why should it be—what difference will it make? Ask him, by all means."

Then, hearing the patter of little feet outside, she left her uncles to answer their letters, and in a few minutes was out in the garden romping with the child.

Horace wrote a beautifully worded letter to Frank Carruthers, expressing the pleasure he and his brother felt at hearing of the promised visit. He begged him to fix his own day for coming, and to stay as long as he conveniently could. The letter was handed to Herbert for perusal and approval. Herbert read it, and after nodding his head continued to hold the letter in his hand, whilst a kind of puzzled, thoughtful look spread over his face.

Strange to say, Horace also fell into a reverie. For some ten minutes the two brothers sat facing one another, stroking their beards. If that vulgar wretch from whose rank mind that feline nickname first sprung could have seen them he would, I am afraid, have been quite satisfied that he had chosen an appropriate designation when he dubbed them the "Tabbies."

Herbert and Horace knew without speaking that their thoughts were running in parallel lines. They often thought of the same thing without a previous word on the subject. The similarity of their natures, no doubt, accounted for this.

"Herbert," said Horace at last, "you are thinking of what Beatrice said?"

"Yes, I am."

"So am I. It seemed a revelation, but we oughtn't to jump at conclusions."

"No," said Herbert, "but the fact remains. Some four years ago he had nothing but his fellowship to live upon."

"You are right, nothing. Beatrice spoke justly. She may by chance have struck the mark."

"I am afraid so. Still, we must not be nasty. Yet, whoever sent the child must have fancied it had some claim on us."

"It is ridiculous to suppose that an entire stranger would have done such a thing."

"Quite so," said Herbert.

"He may have been much tempted; at that time have been driven to his wits' end. It is a sad affair; let us try and piece it together."

Then, like a couple of old women, they began to construct their new theory.

"We will say," began Horace, "he was married four years ago."